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ABSTRACT

The staged performance of oral history narratives scripted by interpreters/ethnographers has significant potential for instigating social change. Recent articles by Dwight Conquergood and Kristin Langellier provide the basis for merging ethnography, oral history and social action projects. Narratives from a 1984 farm crisis project illustrate this concept of oral history performance as social action. Performance of these farm women's narratives served as (1) therapeutic communication for the farm women; (2) a means of informing the public about the reasons for farmers' failures; (3) a platform for requesting legislative assistance; (4) an expression of personal grief over the depression or suicide of their husbands; (5) an assertion of group spirit; (6) a warning to other farmers; and (7) an escape from reality. It is crucial for the interpreter of oral narratives performed in social contexts to attend to nonverbal and vocal clues of the narrators so the original context and interpretation are maintained in the scripted version. (MHC)

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FROM ETHNOGRAPHY TO SOCIAL ACTION THROUGH ORAL HISTORY IN PERFORMANCE

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From Ethnography to Social Action through Oral History in Performance

by Phyllis Scott Carlin

Oral history narrative in scripts for social contexts has extensive potential. Our attention was called to this potential through reports of projects such as those conducted by Maryann Hartman, Beth Hartman, and Burton Alho in 1978, where scripts to influence public policy on the aging and the disabled were funded by grants.[1] The more recent work by Dwight Conquergood with Laotian narratives [2] again emphasizes the unique power of everyday verbal art, which is further augmented with an ethnographer's understanding of its meaning for the people who originally spoke the words. A review of the ethnographic and the sociointerpretive work of our discipline in the past decade yields many other examples of our colleagues engaged in scripting and staging oral history.[3] In this paper, I am focusing on the interpreter's oral history collecting and his/her role as ethnographer and stager of oral narrative. I am specifically speaking about the merging of ethnography, oral history in performance, and social action projects.

Conquergood's recent papers have provided a grounding base for understanding the interpreter as ethnographer.[4] Kristin Langellier's article in a recent issue of Literature in Performance puts into perspective the relationship of

ethnography and performance as social process.[5] I would like to suggest some areas to investigate when natural narratives are collected and staged by in interpreter within a social action project. I note that any performance of such narratives is a social process or a social action; I refer here to those performances that have the double layer of social action and what I will call social purpose. The social act of performing the stories is combined with the goal of instigating awareness and change--in some cases influencing the context from where the stories emerged.

My examples of oral history narrative are extracted from over 500 pages of transcripts from the farm crisis project I began in 1984.[6] This project involved interviewing farm men and women, participant observation in farm crisis seminars and rallies, and observation in community settings where farmers gathered and talked informally, such as coffee shops, dance halls, churches, and local stores. Both interviewing and observations resulted in collection of hundreds of farm narratives. For illustrations herein, I will discuss only one of the several story themes that emerged, the stories that farm women told repeatedly about events that brought them into the position of leadership and major responsibility for their families.

These were stories based on husbands lost in depression over the threatened or certain loss of their farm, husbands giving up, becoming immobilized by despair, alcoholism, and loss of self-confidence, and women left alone because of a

husband's suicide or desertion. In the following example, a woman tells of her husband's descent into total discouragement and stress prior to his suicide, which left her with 5 of 10 children still at home.

"It seems like were one of the first to go, and so we could not handle the situation. There were not the farm coalition groups that are around now, getting the publicity that you need I think to help the people. He just, he just talked to friends. But he didn't have anybody really to talk to about the financial situation that he was in. And I think it would have been a big help to him if there had been somebody around at the time. Just happened to be one of the first to go."

(Interviewer: "Were you aware of how bad things were?")

"Yes. But he had managed to turn things around up to the fall of 1981. Then he could see, starting into the new year, that money was not going to be there to get the ground farmed again, you know, financing that it takes to get things planted. Always had managed to make payments and keep things current until that black fall, one way or another, but he could see that it was not there from that point on."

(Interviewer: "Did you feel the stress as he did or was some of it concealed from you?")

"He did not conceal anything. He shared it with all of us. It was a nightmare for months. He'd walk the floor at night, he could not sleep. Of course, no one else did

either. I was trying to work and take care of my mother. She was dying of cancer at the time. And our sixteen year old boy was smitten with a, only determination they come up with was a viral inflammation, left him without function of his lower extremities that same December."
(Later in the interview:"How did you deal with all this stress yourself?)
"_____would say to me (I'd go to bed and I'd just be zonked out) and he said 'how can you sleep when you got so many problems' and 'I can't sleep,' and I said 'somebody's got to, I don't know what makes me but somebody's got to' and I think that's all there is to it. I don't know why." [7]

Also included in the women's stories of the farm crisis were those recounting how they were the first to recognize that the farm was seriously threatened, they initiated the steps to hold the farming business and the family together, they got a job off the farm, they sought counseling, or they dealt with the bank. They also tell of being the first to admit to friends or the community that they were in difficulty and the first to form support groups, although these were rare in the time period I was interviewing.

All of these are stories of the farm women taking responsibility and taking action, facing reality, admitting to and coping with a staggering amount of problems related to losing a farm. They are narratives that show avoidance of settling for a role of victim and willingness to do difficult and heroic things. However, it is important to

recognize that these stories are not told to project themselves as better or stronger than their husbands. Their meanings are more complex than this. First, they want outsiders to understand that conditions have been desparately bad for farmers--that there are reasons why their husbands experienced failure and reasons for why they could not cope, even reasons for suicide, as we heard given in the sample story. The women explain how farmers are attached to their work to the extent that they understandably cannot recognize the realities of losing it nor the realities of losses too heavy to remedy with next year's crop and better luck.

What these women are proud of is the fact that when they had to take on the responsibilities that their husbands could not, they were able to do some amazingly courageous coping. The telling of these stories includes several significant functions in the context of the farm crisis. I will discuss only two of these at this time. First, spoken narrative discourse serves as a way of controlling the crisis. Their interpretation of events is voiced. They cannot change what has happened, but they can have power in how those events are judged by the local community and the larger public if they can tell their stories.

Secondly, these stories function as therapeutic communication. For months, most of these women silently dealt with family and financial problems, and accomplished some solutions or coping strategies. To finally be able to

tell their story is a release--some will never tell because of the nature of the private information involved. In natural settings such as support groups or crisis seminars, the act of telling stories of experiences were part of the therapeutic process; however, most of the women I interviewed had not taken part in a support group at the time the crisis began to affect their families. In several cases, I was the first person outside the family to hear the story; the therapeutic element in sharing the stories became obvious.

The ethnographer and stager of these stories can retain the interpretations of the farm crisis and the functions of the stories which are projected by the women in the original context. A performance which does that is an ethnographic publication of them. While a documentary script on the farm crisis could be compiled from the script creator's view, based on research of the crisis and context, this script would be different from one which preserves the viewpoint as well as the information.

The ethnographic type of production begins in the field and collection phase. The way the interview is conducted influences the ability of the person to communicate her view in a form that can be reperformed with the least amount of rewriting and rearranging. Some of this amounts to following the oral history guidelines regarding eliciting details, description, dialogue, and imagery. I knew that the interviews were likely to be scripted and

keeping this mind probably caused me to attend more to encouraging elaboration of story episodes, although I seldom overtly requested a " story." (It seems that the narratives collected from the everyday discourse of oral history or informal conversation have both similarities and differences in comparison to narratives that are folk tales more consciously performed as repeatable texts with more attention to aesthetic form, or more readily seen as something to tell by the performer.)

It was crucial in collecting to attend to performance clues to grasp interpretations. For example, there were clues in the farm women's nonverbal and vocal subleties that were the basis for the understanding I came to regarding their continuing loyalty to their partner and their desire to portray their husbands as capable, dignified, respected, and not weak or incompetent. (To me, performance clues are most useful in this way; the restoration of original performance behaviors in production of oral history narrative raises more complex questions which are outside the focus of this paper). And, finally, the empathic relationship between the collector and teller assisted in understanding and preserving the interpretive frame of the story. The placing of self in another's perspective is a skill we recognize as one important result of our experience as interpreters. In oral history collecting, it serves to improve the trust relationship, the design of questions, and the depth and disclosure of the response. Empathy in

interviewing is stressed by James Hoopes, an author of one of the guides to oral history collecting. [8]

Just as the collector operates in an ethnographer's role, combined with the perspective of an interpreter and stager, the transcripts now available for adaptation demand retaining the ethnographer's perspective in the kind of project I am describing. The influence of editing and selecting and omitting is undeniable, of course, but the maintenance of the informant's interpretation of the crisis remain as a guiding concept.

Farm women's narratives, if told at all beyond local support groups, will occasionally be heard at crisis seminars in communities, and exerpts have been seen on television news. However, my observations of these events were that the farm men's stories filled the majority of the time. Farm women's public outlets have been limited, but not as much as the stories we are just now getting from agricultural women of past decades and centuries. The staged performance in social contexts as an outlet for powerless or silent groups has been discussed by Kay Capo in her article ""From Academic to Social-Political Uses of Performance." [9]

The featuring of natural narrative, which is already serving a function in its original social context, in a project that restages the performance for a controlled or planned social context audience seems to hold potential for

both therapeutic and public action results. In the case of the farm crisis, farm men and women say repeatedly that their situation is not understood or not known by most U.S. citizens, policy-makers, or even those supposed to be in positions to give legal, financial, and mental counseling to farmers in difficulty. To confront this, some farmers have tried to tell their stories publicly--in fact, more disclosure of personal problems has come from farmers thatn is the common norm for the group. However, the enabling power of an interpreters theatre script performed in various contexts extends the telling of the story. Ethically, the adapter has a responsibility first to understand the people and the meaning of their narratives to them.

To stage a point of view is a political action;this is true whether the script is a novel, a short story, or a natural narrative; the text projects values and perspectives. What we are doing in staging oral history is very much related to staging other texts; the differences reside in the applicaton of ethnographic research procedures and the skills required in collecting and interpreting natural narrative. The deliberate persuasive or therapeutic objective of a social contexts project is likewise similar whether using oral history or written literature. It seems especially informative to studies in sociointerpretation in general to recognize that natural verbal art is performance in social context, in original form operating therapeutically and/or politically, and even existing

because it is a reaction to emotional needs or social crisis and because it grows from a drama of everyday life.

In my investigation of the functioning of crisis narratives as told among farmers or by farmers to non-farmers in the community, there were a number of functions that were identifiable. I have referred to two general ones thus far, and will now provide a summary of functions operating in the total body of narratives which include several themes in addition to the one I used for examples. My attention to functions of stories reflects research in other contexts where personal narratives have been examined. For examples, Mary Brown discusses narratives serving to promote or suppress motivation in the workplace; Sandra Dolby-Stahl saw personal narratives as a genre instructing, cautioning, entertaining, reinforcing, and illustrating; Margaret Yocum discovered cohesiveness a function of family narrative; and Steven Zeitlin et al. found a certain type of family story to operate as consolation. [10] With the narrating of personal stories, farming men and women are informing the public or uniniformed non-farmers about their crisis, persuading society that their failures are attributable to economic, political, and societal causes beyond their control, accounting for failure, requesting understanding and legislative assistance, expressing personal grief and despair, or determination, asserting a sense of group identity and spirit, warning other farmers about dangers,

and occasionally escaping from the reality to an envisioned better future or a return to prior prosperity. [11]

The extension of these forces coming from the act of verbal art is to me a worthwhile goal of a social contexts project; in fact that is part of what constitutes sociointerpretation, in my view. The narratives are released to again seek to persuade, account for, warn, unify, and express to a formal audience created by the situation of scripted performance. To me this coordination of functions satisfies some ethical dilemmas we can find ourselves confronting as ethnographers who direct performances of collected stories for audiences we create by intiating a performance. When I created scripts for radio from the interviews, I attempted to preserve the interpretation of the farm crisis that the people I had interviewed projected. I attempted to provide an opportunity for the narratives to function in some of the ways they had in original contexts. This is my base for presuming to influence social change--the impulse of the people who spoke the narratives is hopefully magnified. Their reach toward changing the dynamics of their context through verbal art is the base for the use of aesthetic and rhetorical powers of staged performance.

Notes

[1] Maryann Hartman, Beth Hartman, and Burton Alho, "Using Oral Interpretation to Affect Public Policy," Paper presented to the Speech Communication Association, Minneapolis, Minnesota (November 4, 1978).

[2] Dwight Conquergood, "'A Sense of the Other': Interpretation and Ethnographic Research," in Proceedings of the Seminar/Conference on Oral Traditions, ed. Isabel Crouch (Las Cruces, New Mexico:New Mexico State University, 1983), 148-155.

[3] Kay Ellen Capo, "From Academic to Social-Political Uses of Performance," in Performance of Literature in Historical Perspectives, ed. David W. Thompson, (Lanham, MD.: University Press of America, 1983) and Phyllis Scott Carlin, "Sociointerpretation Network Report," presented at the Pre-convention Interpretation Conference, Speech Communication Association, November, 1983.

[4] Dwight Conquergood, "'A Sense of the Other'" Interpretation and Ethnographic Research" and "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance," Literature in Performance 5 (1985), 1-13.

[5] Kristin Langellier, "From Text to Social Context," Literature in Performance 6 (1986), 60-70.

[6] A detailed report of this study is included in "Ethnography of Farm Crisis Narratives," an unpublished essay by Phyllis Scott Carlin, 1-46.

[7] Transcript FW#103 (March 4, 1985). In oral history transcripts of Farm Crisis Project conducted by Phyllis Scott Carlin.

[8] James Hoopes, Oral History: An Introduction for Students (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 96.

[9] See Capo.

[10] Mary Helen Brown, "That Reminds Me of a Story: Speech Action in Organizational Socialization" The Western Journal of Speech Communication, 49 (Winter, 1985), 28; Sandra K. Dolby-Stahl, "A Literary Folkloristic Methodology for the Study of Meanings in Personal Narrative," Journal of Folklore Research, 22, no. 1 (April, 1985), 47-48; Steven Zeitlin, Amy J. Kotkin, and Holly Cutting Baker, A Celebration of American Family Folklore (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 83; Margaret Yocum, "Blessing the Ties that Bind: Storytelling at Family Festivals, in A Celebration of American Family Folklore, 257.

[11] Phyllis Scott Carlin, "Ethnography of Farm Crisis Narratives," 17.